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SUBJECT Defectors

JIM LEHRER: President Reagan expressed some suspicions today about the three recent Soviet defectors who got cold feet: the sailor who after jumping ship twice finally said no thanks to defecting; the Soviet soldier who holed up in the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan three days after having second thoughts; and the most bizarre one of all, Vitaly Yurchenko, the KGB man who flew home to Russia today after a three-month defection he now claims never really happened. President Reagan said it's possible all three were orchestrated, or that each, in his own way, really did get cold feet legitimately.

We add a genuine expert's opinion and speculation to that mix tonight. He's Vladislav Bittman (?), a former Czech secret agent who defected to the West in 1968. He now goes by the name of Lawrence Martin and teaches journalism at Boston University. He is also the author of a recent book, "The KGB and Soviet Disinformation."

Mr. Bittman, does it smell like a three-part orchestrated ploy to you?

VLADISLAV BITTMAN: No, it doesn't. When I watched Mr. Yurchenko at the press conference and when I watched his reactions, I think that he went through a very severe psychological crisis, like psychological shock.

Actually, every defector goes through that process. It's a very serious traumatic experience.

LEHRER: President Reagan said that today, that he suspected that it was a terribly traumatic experience for somebody to denounce their own country and come over.

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Go through that with me. What is the process?

BITTMAN: Well, it is probably the most traumatic experience in the life of that individual. In my case, yes, it was the most serious crisis of my life. Because one has to give up everything. One has to give up your own country, your own set of values, your relatives, your friends, all your possessions, and leave that all behind and go enter a new country and start from scratch. The people you meet act differently. The American culture is totally different from European culture. It is a very traumatic experience. It's like standing like a child and learning everything from scratch.

You may say, "Well, he was stationed here for four years or more. He knew Americans." Well, it's different to be here as an intelligence operative representing the superpower, or standing here as a defector, defenseless, trying to find his own place in the new society. It's a tremendously difficult period for every individual.

LEHRER: Was it difficult for you?

BITTMAN: It was very difficult. And I would say that I hit a bottom, not after three months. For me, it was about the second year was the most difficult, after about two years, when I was totally down, trying to establish my new life, find a job, find my place in this highly competitive society. And that's tremendously important and difficult for a newcomer from a communist country, because there, the state helps you in everything. The state, the government, the party helps you to find a job, to do this or that. Here, the defector has to find his own place and start from scratch, taking care of himself. And that's very hard.

LEHRER: Did the idea of going back pass through your mind?

BITTMAN: No, never. I went through a very difficult time, but it never occurred to me to go back. Maybe because of what happened in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviets. That is also the reason why I'm sitting here and talking to you, because I realized that I spent 14 years of my life as an espionage expert working mainly for the Soviets, because the Czechoslovak intelligence service is working mainly for the Soviets. A small country with 14 1/2 million people is operating in more than 50 countries around the world. This is absolutely ridiculous. It's not for the benefit of Czechoslovakia.

So that was -- for me, that was the moment when I realized I just cannot, I cannot work for them, because of what

happened, what they did.

But it is -- it's a very difficult decision.

LEHRER: You know, President Reagan also said today that he was perplexed by these three cases, the sailor, the soldier, and the KGB man. And he suggested that most Americans were probably perplexed too because they couldn't understand why, when it came down to the final analysis, a person would choose going back to the Soviet Union rather than staying in the United States.

You can understand that. Right? That's not a perplexing thing to you?

BITTMAN: No, that's not. You see, if we have second thoughts whether this was orchestrated or not, in case that Mr. Yurchenko was sent here as a double agent with some kind of a special mission, with a disinformation mission to deceive the American decision-making elite or American public, then we have to take into consideration the price the Soviets have to pay for it. In order to be believable, he had to come with a lot of true information.

As a former disinformation expert, because for two years I was the Deputy Commander of the Czechoslovak Disinformation Department, mainly orchestrating anti-American campaigns around the world, if the disinformation campaign is to succeed, it has to be well-rooted in factual information, verifiable information. And the relation between true and disinformation, information within that disinformation message is about 90 percent to 10, 90 percent of verifiable true information and 10 percent of the disinformation.

That means, in this case, he has to give up a lot of information about KGB agents, about KGB structure, about their operations, about their objectives. That's extremely sensitive information and a very high price to pay only to -- what, to stir up public attention before the summit?

I would say that they will use this channel for disinformation, like Mr. Yurchenko, in case that they think that they would face a very serious crisis between the two countries, between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the message, the disinformation message will be very, very important, something that I would think would be like the countries would face the war, military conflict. In that case, they would send somebody like Yurchenko with a very important disinformation message.

LEHRER: What about the young sailor, Medvid? What do you make of that?

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BITTMAN: I think that that poor guy wanted to defect. You know, somebody doesn't jump into Mississippi River twice from huge ship only to take a swim. No, he wanted to defect. And I think that it was mishandled by American authorities. Because the fact that he changed his mind -- well, he's a young guy who doesn't know much about the procedures. He doesn't know what actually may be -- maybe he doesn't know what the term asylum means. It is very, very frustrating to meet a group of people, even Americans, who are asking questions which are rather strange. He's not somebody who is very experienced in international relations and legal procedures. He simply got scared and frustrated. And probably that's why he changed his mind.

But you see, the fact that he jumped the ship twice, it says something about the motivation behind it.

LEHRER: What happens, what do you think is going to happen, for instance, to Yurchenko? He got back on his plane, he's gone back home to the Soviet Union. Are they going to shoot him, try him? What are they going to do to him?

BITTMAN: Well, that's the sad part of the whole thing for him. You see, the press didn't mention one very important thing. He is an officer. He has a military rank, like any other intelligence operative. My rank, the last rank I had was that of a major. In his case, if it is true that he was the man number five, or six, or ten, or whatever, in the KGB, that indicates that his rank was probably lieutenant colonel or colonel. The Soviets, the KGB they know that he was not kidnapped, they know that he was not drugged. This is all a propaganda ploy to save the face. That means that after landing in Moscow, they will prepare another show, propaganda show for domestic press and foreign media. And after that, Mr. Yurchenko will disappear. He will be court-martialed because he committed treason, whether he likes it or not. And they know it.

LEHRER: Do you think -- excuse me. Go ahead.

BITTMAN: He will be put in front of a military court and sentenced for treason.

Now, what they will give him, that's a question, whether he will spent 10 years or 15 or 20 years in prison, how many, that's difficult to say. But he will be court-martialed and sentenced to prison for treason.

LEHRER: You were court-martialed in absentia, were you not?

BITTMAN: That's right.

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LEHRER: And sentenced. What was your sentence?

BITTMAN: I was sentenced to death.

LEHRER: You were sentenced to death.

What do you think will happen to Medvid?

BITTMAN: To Medvid?

LEHRER: Yeah.

BITTMAN: That's a different thing. He's a young guy. He's not politically very experienced. Maybe he won't be even put in prison. That's a totally different story.

But with Mr. Yurchenko, a former high-ranking officer of the KGB, knows, should know what he's doing.

LEHRER: But he knows -- when he got on that plane today, he knows that he's going back to prison?

BITTMAN: Yes, he does. He does.

LEHRER: Or worse.

BITTMAN: And what he's trying to do now is to get out with a relatively mild sentence. That's what he's hoping for.

LEHRER: Mr. Bittman, thank you very much.